

## The Theater

There was more than an hour to go before curtain time and the theater was already packed. The aisles were littered with paper cups and candy wrappers. The whole place smelled of beer. People were standing up in their seats making toasts, sloshing the beer in their cups, spilling it all over each other.

“Let the show begin!” one man cried above all the others.

“Yes, let’s get on with it!” someone else shouted, letting out a drunken laugh.

People began banging their seats and chanting, “Bring on the show! Bring on the show!”

The theatergoers went on like this for the entire hour, but to no avail. The curtain did not rise until the exact minute the play had been scheduled to begin. The actors and actresses filed silently onto the stage, each one in full costume and heavily caked with make-up. Music could be heard coming over the loudspeakers. It was quiet, somber music. A hush fell over the audience. The actors and actresses began dancing. In slow, awkward movements they carried themselves through their steps. A man in a purple robe took the center of the stage. Gradually the others began to cluster around him, dancing more and more feverishly. As they lifted up their hands to him, he magically rose above them, blessing them with waves of his scepter.

The music became louder, more frenetic. The dancers could no longer keep their bodies in time with it. A large clay pot was brought in and set down in front of the man wearing the purple robe. Inside the pot were live coals. Smoke rose from the pot. The rim glowed.

Suddenly from the rear of the theater came a great cry and everyone turned back their heads to see what it was. A troupe of actors had begun walking down the center aisle, carrying a boy of about fifteen on their shoulders. The boy had long girlish hair and delicate features. He was beautiful. The crowd aahh’d when they saw him. The actors carrying the boy were dressed up as clowns. They grinned and guffawed as they took the boy up onto the stage.

The man in the purple robe descended and received the boy. After embracing him, the man stooped down and permitted the boy to kiss him on the forehead. The music stopped. There was a moment of silence as the crowd waited to see what would happen next.

The scepter was in fact a pair of tongs. The man in the purple robe thrust them into the pot and picked up one of the burning coals. The boy opened his mouth, letting his tongue hang out from between his lips. The man placed the coal on the boy’s tongue.

There was a sizzling sound, just barely audible, as the coal came into contact with the saliva in the boy’s mouth. The boy winced. The audience looked on in stunned silence. Unable to bear the pain more than a few split seconds, the boy let the coal drop to the floor.

The man in the purple robe took another coal from the pot and drew it across the boy’s face. The flesh burned. The boy was obviously in great pain, but he neither flinched nor whimpered.

“This is no play!” a lady in the rear of the theater cried out. “You’re really hurting him!”

“You can’t go on with this!” a gentleman wearing a dinner jacket shouted.

But the man in the purple robe continued to draw coal after coal over the boy’s skin until the face of the beautiful boy was completely disfigured.

There was no applause when the curtain fell and the play finally ended. The audience, too deeply moved to speak, left the theater, silently passing under a marquee that proclaimed:

### THERE ARE NO ILLUSIONS

“An outstanding performance,” a husband said to his wife only when they were well outside the theater.

“Tremendous!” she answered, with tears in her eyes.

Previously published in *Dream International Quarterly* 9:57–58 (1988).